

13593 (3)

LITTLE KNOWN LINCOLN HUMOR



Copyright, 1937
The Lincoln National
Life Insurance
Company

Little Known Lincoln Humor

By Louis A. Warren, Litt. D.

Director Emeritus, The Lincoln National Life Foundation

LINCOLN'S fame as a humorist has been established largely by his ability to draw upon an inexhaustible store of anecdotes for illustrative purposes; but he was more than a story-teller. He was endowed naturally with a sense of humor which often found expression in tense and serious situations. This collection of authentic incidents in Lincoln's life is not a book of jokes, but a compilation of little-known episodes which reveal those deep-seated impulses accounting for Lincoln's quaint and pleasing humor.

Quizzing a Prospective Doorkeeper

AMONG the horde of applicants for patronage who advanced upon the White House, there were those who were seeking some of the most unimportant occupations about the capitol. They seemed to think that it was necessary to see the President himself about the positions they desired and in the midst of serious duties Lincoln was often bothered by their trivial requests.

There came to the Executive Mansion one day, an applicant for doorkeeper to the House. He happened to be one of those impossible individuals who would not fit into a place where any responsibility whatever would be involved, and Lincoln immediately began to plan his dismissal in as kindly a manner as possible. The conversation which followed was something like this:

"So you want to be doorkeeper to the House, eh?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Well have you ever been a doorkeeper? Have you ever had any experience in doorkeeping?"

"Well, no—no actual experience, sir."

"Any theoretical experience? Any instructions in the duties and ethics of doorkeeping?"

"Um—no."

"Have you ever attended lectures on doorkeeping?"

"No, sir."

"Have you read any textbooks on the subject?"

"No."

"Have you conversed with anyone who has read such a book?"

"No."

"Well then, my friend, don't you see that you haven't a single qualification for this important post?" said Lincoln, in a reproachful tone.

"Yes, I do," said the applicant, and he took leave humbly, almost gratefully.

An Offended God and a Lightning Rod

ABRAHAM LINCOLN made his first political speech in Springfield, Illinois, and had as an opponent on the platform George Forquer, who, having recently changed his politics, secured a lucrative government appointment. Forquer's home had been equipped with lightning rods, the first in the city, and Lincoln had observed this new improvement on the way to the political meeting.

Representatives of both parties spoke in turn from the same platform, and it fell to the task of Forquer to answer Lincoln. He opened his remarks by saying "This young man must be taken

down, and I am truly sorry that the task devolves upon me.'' With a show of egotism and superiority he attacked Lincoln with a line of sarcasm for which he was famous, and concluded by ridiculing Lincoln's appearance as well as his arguments.

Lincoln did not seem to be greatly offended by the discourteous remarks, but as soon as Forquer had closed and the opportunity to reply was given, he went to the platform, answered the arguments of his opponent, and then closed with this statement: "The gentleman commenced his speech by saying that 'this young man,' alluding to me, 'must be taken down.' I am not so young in years as I am in the tricks and trades of a politician, but," said he, pointing to Forquer, "live long or die young, I would rather die now than, like the gentleman, change my politics and with the change receive an office worth three thousand dollars a year, and then feel obliged to erect a lightning rod over my house to protect a guilty conscience from an offended God."

An Itemized Appraisal

A LETTER of inquiry which Lincoln received about the financial status of a ne'er-do-well was answered as follows:

"Yours of the 10th received. First of all, he has a wife and baby; together they ought to be worth \$500,000 to any man. Secondly, he has an office in which there is a table worth \$1.50 and three chairs worth, say, \$1. Last of all, there is in one corner a large rat-hole which will bear looking into."

A Saucy Little Woman

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, by virtue of his office as President, became Commander in Chief of the Nation's military forces. Even in the serious business of issuing orders in the grim struggle which followed there was occasionally a bit of humor expressed.

Pressure was often brought to bear upon him to make certain military appointments and promotions, so that he was ever besieged with all kinds of requests. One day the wife of an officer appeared on behalf of her husband with a vigorous appeal for his promotion to brigadier-general. She became very insistent in her demands which finally resulted in Lincoln's sending a note to Secretary of War Stanton, with this comment: "Hon. Secretary of War: On this day, Mrs. called upon me. She is the wife of Major. of the regular army. She wants her husband made a brigadier-general. She is a saucy little woman and I think she will torment me until I have to do it."

No Vices — No Virtues

LINCOLN'S lone companion in a stagecoach leaving Springfield, Illinois, for Indiana early one morning was a Kentuckian, unknown to Lincoln, on his way home from a visit in the West. After they had traveled a short distance the stranger offered Lincoln a chew of a tobacco twist. "No, sir, thank you, I never chew," Lincoln said. Later in the morning, the gentleman took from his pocket a fine leather case, which he opened, and offered Lincoln a cigar. This also Lincoln politely declined, remarking at the same time that he never smoked.

The day wore on, and as they neared the stage station where a stop was to be made for dinner, the Kentuckian took a flask from his satchel with the remark, "Well stranger, seeing you do not smoke or chew, perhaps you'll take a little French brandy. It's a fine article and a good appetizer, besides." Lincoln found it necessary to decline this last best evidence of Kentucky hospitality on the same ground that had caused him to reject the tobacco.

That evening when they reached a point where they made connections for different stages, the Kentuckian shook Lincoln warmly by the hand. "See here, stranger," he said, good humor-

edly, "you're a clever, but strange companion. I may never see you again, and I don't want to offend you, but I want to say this: my experience has taught me that a man who has no vices has blamed few virtues! Good-day."

Lincoln, many times in his career, when he was invited to accept tokens of hospitality in which he did not indulge, would refer with much merriment to his Kentucky friend, with some statement about the stranger hitting the nail on the head.

A Small "Nubbin"

Lincoln once had an appointment to meet a committee of which Alexander Stephens was a member. It was a raw spring day, and Stephens, a very small man, was wearing several extra wraps when he arrived. Lincoln observed him in the process of removing several coats and after the last overcoat had been removed the President said to Secretary Seward "Well, I lived in a corn country all my life, but I never saw before so many husks for such a little nubbin."

A Prospective Vice President Humiliated

ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S name was before the first National Republican Convention as a candidate for the nomination of Vice President of the United States. The convention assembled at Philadelphia in June 1856. At this time Lincoln was in attendance at a special term of the Champaign Circuit Court which began at Urbana on Tuesday, June 17, with Judge Davis on the bench. The judge and a few of the lawyers were putting up at a hotel where the landlady summoned them to breakfast by the ringing of a loud bell. The men thought they were being aroused too early, so they decided to get possession of the bell and con-

ceal it during the term of court. By a majority vote, Lincoln was chosen to carry out the decree about removing the bell.

On the morning the decision was made, a little earlier than usual, just before noon, Lincoln was seen to leave the courtroom. This indicated to the other members of the bar that he was going to fulfill his assignment. He hastened to the hotel, and as soon as an opportunity presented itself, slipped unobserved into the dining room and secreted the bell under his coat. He was just in the act of making off with the bell when Judge Davis and Lawyer Whitney, two of the conspirators, came into the hotel, the former holding in his hand a copy of the *Chicago Tribune* which had just reached town. It contained the news that Abraham Lincoln had received 110 votes (not enough for election) as a nominee for Vice President at the Philadelphia convention.

"Great business this," chuckled Davis, slyly calling attention to Lincoln's bulging coat, "for a man who aspires to be Vice-President of the United States." Lincoln only smiled as he still tried to keep the breakfast bell concealed and remarked with reference to the Philadelphia vote: "Surely it ain't me; there's a great man named Lincoln down in Massachusetts; I reckon it's him."

Don't Shoot

THE Secretary of War was continually complaining about Lincoln's weakness in granting pardons and showing clemency when the lives of condemned men were at stake. Even here we find occasionally an order similar to this one: "Colonel Mulligan: If you haven't shot Barney D--- yet—don't."

Lincoln's "Certificate of Moral Character"

WHEN Lincoln left Springfield, Illinois, for Washington to assume his duties as President, his inaugural address was placed in a satchel which was to be guarded with extra attention. It was placed in the care of the President-elect's oldest son, Robert.

Somehow it was lost, and with deep concern Lincoln approached one of his body-guards and said, "Lamon, I guess I have lost my certificate of moral character, written by myself. Bob has lost the gripsack containing my inaugural address."

Another search was made which led to the baggage room. Upon arriving there, Lincoln observed a bag which he thought was his, but upon opening it found a soiled shirt, some paper collars, and a bottle of whiskey. However, later on the satchel was discovered in a pile of baggage, and once again the first inaugural address was safely in the hands of its author.

This incident caused much merriment after the satchel was found and of course it reminded Lincoln of a story. He said: "I once knew a fellow who had saved up fifteen hundred dollars, and had placed it in a private banking establishment. The bank soon failed, and he afterwards received ten per cent of his investment. He then took his one hundred and fifty dollars and deposited it in a savings bank, where he was sure it would be safe. In a short time this bank also failed, and he received at the final settlement ten per cent on the amount deposited. When the fifteen dollars was paid over to him, he held it in his hand and looked at it thoughtfully, then he said: 'Now, darn you! I have got you reduced to a portable shape, so I'll put you in my pocket.'"

Suiting the action to the word, Mr. Lincoln took his address from the bag and carefully placed it in the inside pocket of his vest, but held on to the satchel with as much interest as if it still contained his "certificate of moral character" written by himself.

A Member of the Aristocracy

FOUR months after Lincoln married Mary Todd, a convention was held in Sangamon County for the purpose of selecting the county's choice for the congressional nomination. There was another aspirant for the nomination from Sangamon—Lincoln's friend, Edward D. Baker. Two factors, one positive and the other negative, were largely responsible for Lincoln's failure to win the support of the party at the county convention. First, he had recently married an aristocrat; second, he did not belong to a church.

Lincoln got a big laugh out of the attempt to put him among the aristocrats and wrote to a friend, "It would astonish if not amuse the older citizens to learn that I (a strange, friendless, un-educated, penniless boy, working on a flatboat at ten dollars per month) have been put down here as a candidate of pride, wealth, and aristocratic family distinction. Yet so, chiefly, it was."

Nevertheless, much against his wishes, he was made one of the county delegates to the district convention to help Baker get the nomination. He wrote with reference to this appointment: "I shall be fixed a good deal like a fellow who is made groomsman to a man that has cut him out, and is marrying his own dear gal."



*I am, in height,
six feet four inches, nearly;
lean in flesh, weighing on an
average one hundred and eighty
pounds; dark complexion, with
coarse black hair and gray eyes.
No other marks or brands recol-
lected.*

A. Lincoln

LINCOLN NATIONAL
LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY